

# BUILDING A BETTER COMMUNITY

## Volunteer efforts of Jeff Nix and other TED attorneys

Jeff Nix is a regular guy, who believes extraordinary results can be achieved with minimal effort. He, like many others at TED, routinely exceed the requirement for 50 hours of pro bono service imposed by the Georgia Bar. If you share his personal passion for supporting underserved and overlooked Atlantans, then please consider volunteering with the Atlanta Volunteer Lawyers Foundation (AVLF) and its Standing With Our Neighbors (SWON) Initiative.



Jeff Nix

SWON focuses on issues of mobility that impact many underserved Atlanta neighborhoods, including those in the English Avenue and Vine City areas on the Westside. The lack of affordable housing has made these areas incubators for unscrupulous slumlords operating dilapidated, barely



Shawntel Hebert

habitable housing units used to prey upon Atlanta's working poor. Families whose income is based upon minimum wage, social security or disability benefits provide a ready pool of victims for these slumlords to prey upon. A typical minimum wage earner would need to work in excess of 100 hours a week in order to afford rent for a median two-bedroom apartment in most other Atlanta neighborhoods.



Coby Nixon

The SWON program typically represents working poor families fighting against slumlords who more often than not, seek to evict those who have the courage to complain about their living conditions. AVLF studies establish a direct correlation between evictions, crime and student drop-out rates. Students who attend two

or more different schools a year due to evictions and change of address, are 10 times more likely to fail in school and never receive a diploma. Working poor parents who change their address on an annual basis often raise working poor children in an endless cycle of poverty.

Jeff has witnessed a lot throughout his 32 years of practicing law, including instances of injustice in local communities. As the Atlanta skyline continues to sprout high-end luxury condominiums and apartments with rents, often exceeding \$2,000 per month, affordable housing for the working poor is fast becoming extinct. When such private developments are coupled with the elimination of public housing projects in all major cities, including Atlanta, the results are disastrous for minimum wage earners.



Chapelle Forest housing project (source: apartments.com)



Villa Estates (source: apartments.com)

The affordable housing crisis is not new – it began years ago with the demolition of the East Lake Meadows public housing project in East Atlanta. A pro bono client who resided in East Lake Meadows exposed Jeff to his first legal experience with urban blight, housing code violations and tenant rights. While the demolition of East Lake Meadows gave rise to the trendy Villages of East Lake neighborhood, it also decreased affordable housing in the area by 80%. Since East Lake Meadows, Jeff has partnered with AVLF and other organizations to create positive change for living conditions of the working poor.

Being drawn to complicated and challenging projects, in 2011 Jeff got involved with a case against the Chapelle Forest housing project. What he uncovered at Chappelle Forest, three miles from his home in Midtown, shocked and appalled even City government officials.

The story of the Chapelle 7 centered on a slumlord who lived in Las Vegas, owed more than \$2m dollars in combined property taxes and other unpaid taxes, participated in rent gouging and left families living in conditions worse than some Third World countries. Jeff leveraged his talents and connections to expose the slumlord, move the 32 families into safe housing and have the housing project condemned.

Focused on taking down slumlords, a similar case arose in 2019 at Villa Estates with a delinquent landlord living in Haiti. After refusing to address tenant issues, Jeff led the effort to sue and after negotiations, reached a settlement of \$135,000 split between five working poor families.

Jeff is not alone in his work with AVLF. The last five years, Shawntel Hebert has taken on pro bono cases with AVLF and its Saturday Lawyer Program largely tied to landlord tenant issues. As an employment litigator, there are many situations where Shawntel can support clients on representation needs involving litigation. Further, her volunteer work on the Westside of Atlanta has given her intimate knowledge about the housing inequities faced by hardworking families on a daily basis. Shawntel's interest in education and community building are driving forces for her volunteer service.

Coby Nixon is also invested in the fight for equality throughout Atlanta. For the past eight years, Coby has led the charge for Taylor English's participation in AVLF's Saturday Lawyer Program. From rounding up volunteers to giving of his own billable time on pro bono cases, Coby's commitment to ensuring that disadvantaged residents have capable legal representation affirms why he is a quality attorney.

Jeff, Shawntel and Coby volunteer their time because they see the negative impacts on families and children living in impoverished neighborhoods due to happenstance, not choice. The challenges and disadvantages these families experience can lead to a cycle of disruption, especially in terms of education and access to basic needs. AVLF and the SWON program look to break that cycle by providing pro bono legal services and support resources.

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Atlanta's affordable housing crisis is now worse than ever with COVID-19 exacerbating many issues for families nationally and in our own backyard, specifically with evictions. Our working poor

and minimum wage earners suffer from the result. In Fulton County alone, more than 3,500 eviction cases are pending. Volunteering time for pro bono cases is a powerful way for Taylor English to give back and support the greater Atlanta community. Whether you have hours to give due to a work/lull or you want to squeeze in a little time to do good between clients, there is always a need for legal services. Please consider donating your time to the SWON initiative. To learn more, contact Coby Nixon.